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## IS PEACE A ZIONIST VISION OR FANTASY?

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**Labor Zionism and Revisionism / Labor's Pragmatism / Revisionist Nationalism / Political Upheaval 1977-1992 / The London Agreement and the Intifada / The Oslo Accords**

[Editor's Note: Stanley Ringler is an officer in the International Department of the Israel Labor Party and a Reform rabbi. Here he presents his understanding of the conflict over the peace process in Israel. The views he expresses reflect a Labor understanding of Zionist history.]

The great divide between the Left and Right in Israel is not a consequence of the "peace process." It is rather the expression of the still unresolved struggle between two fundamentally different Zionist ideological camps. One is represented by Labor Zionism, the other by Revisionism. For more than 75 years each has advocated a vision of Israel which is antithetical to that of the other.

### **Labor Zionism and Revisionism**

The Labor Zionist tradition is rooted in the vision and values of the biblical prophets, the ideology of nineteenth century nationalism and the early twentieth century socialist movements. From the outset, the Labor tradition in its various historical manifestations sought to build and secure an exemplary Jewish national home. Early Labor

Zionist thinkers such as Nahman Syrkin and Ber Borochov dreamed of a Jewish country where the defining values of national life would be social and economic justice, peace, democracy, and pluralism. These, it was believed, would be best realized in a social-democratic political framework.

The Revisionist movement emphasized the primacy of the nation and of Jewish hegemony over Eretz Israel over and above social reform. And while Revisionism advocates ethical living and social harmony, it does so within a strong context of Jewish nationalism.

Both the Labor and Revisionist movements expressed some degree of messianic sentiment in their ideological visions of the Jewish future. This was characteristic of most of Zionist thought. Zionism was after all first and foremost a redemptive movement, which, from its beginning, projected a messianic-like vision of the Jewish future.

In its beginnings, the *religious* Zionist movement was not nearly as extremely nationalistic as it is today. Modern Orthodoxy was the natural heir of the religious vision of Jewish sovereignty.

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Rooted in the Bible, the concept of Zion was transmitted throughout the ages in prayer, ritual, and religious thought and culture. In fact, as a modern expression of Zionism, religious Zionist advocates took their place both separately (in Mizrahi) and within the other "secular" movements. Indeed, until the 1967 War, religious Zionism was considered to be a moderate movement which, while advocating Torah principles, was nonetheless comfortable in accommodating itself to the democratic and social principles of national life as defined by the dominant Labor establishment. It was in the post-1967 period that the euphoria of "return" to the patriarchal holy sites on the West Bank produced the Gush Emunim movement, the first extreme popular expression of religious nationalism within the religious Zionist camp.

### Labor's Pragmatism

During the pre-state period of the *Yishuv*, the Labor Zionist movement was the dominant force in building the social, economic, and political foundations of the modern Jewish state. At the time, the emphasis on labor and the values of work and collective responsibility were central principles in the struggle to transform the Jewish people both physically and morally. This was part of the revolutionary ethic of the movement in Eastern Europe and, of course, in *halutzic* Palestine.

When there was little work available, the well-being of society was often set above the profitability of a particular enterprise. Similarly, after statehood, modest, poorly planned modular apartment units were rapidly constructed in order to be able to move large numbers of new immigrants out of tents and *maabarot*. This sort of activity expressed the ideological commitments of the Labor movement. That is, in the application of principle to reality the Labor Zionist leadership was socially conscious and pragmatic. It faced reality and made accommodations in order to secure the nation's interests.

Thus, in the first decades of the state a leisurely process of planning and a concern for efficiency and profitability were not primary concerns when faced with hundreds of thousands of homeless and penniless new immigrants who needed to be housed, found work, and provided with other basic social services. One matter, however, which was not subject to compromise was the state's security apparatus. The Israel Defense Forces was built on the foundation of the pre-state Hagana, a military force intended to *defend* the interests of the Jewish people in the land, not to shape them.

Characteristically, David Ben-Gurion brought the Labor Zionist movement to accept the 1947 UN-pro-

posed partition of Mandatory Palestine, despite the continued opposition of Yitzhak Tabenkin, the head of Ahdut Avodah, the left wing of Labor. Ben-Gurion understood that the "Partition Plan" was intended to reconcile the contradictory struggle of the Zionist and Palestinian nationalist movements. It was also understood that "partition" would finally make possible the establishment of a Jewish state.

### Revisionist Nationalism

The Revisionist movement, which after independence was transformed into the Herut Party, now the Likud, had pursued with vigor the goal of Jewish national self-determination in all of Mandatory Palestine. It was therefore bitterly disappointed by the partition decision. Menachem Begin, then leader of the Irgun, announced in a special broadcast on the Irgun radio station on the day after independence was declared by Ben-Gurion, that "the Homeland has not been liberated but mutilated....One phase of the battle for the restoration of the whole Land of Israel to its God-covenanted owners has ended. But only one phase...our country is not yet liberated....Our God-given country is a unity."

The traditional anthem of the Revisionist movement, the Irgun in the pre-state period, the Herut party after 1948, and its Zionist youth movement Betar, continues to be the same. It calls with undiluted nationalist fervor for Jewish hegemony on *both* sides of the Jordan, i.e., not only the West Bank but the East as well. The anthem has not been changed or amended, and while no longer in public use, neither has the symbol of the Revisionist movement, a map of the Greater Land of Israel with a rifle grasped by a hand, above the motto — "only this way."

Revisionist Zionism advocates a theory of nationalism in which the primacy of the nation is reflected in the assertion of power. And it is through the use of power that policies can be shaped. Thus, in the pre-state period, against the good judgment of the Labor-dominated Hagana, the Revisionist Irgun and Lehi groups used violence and terrorism against the British, believing this to be the most effective way to advance the cause of Jewish statehood. Likewise, in 1982 the Likud-led government of Menachem Begin and with Ariel Sharon as Defense Minister used the Israel Defense Forces in an offensive mode to invade Lebanon, in what, in Labor's eyes, was the first such use of the IDF for offensive purposes.

The Likud-led government believed that through the use of Israel's military power, it would be able to create a new political reality in Lebanon. In this way

it expected that simultaneously the Palestinian's leadership and military arm would be removed from the region and thus render helpless any potential or real Palestinian resistance in the territories. To achieve this end the Likud leadership deceived the country into believing that its objectives were more modest and that the goal was solely to remove the threat posed by the presence of terrorists in southern Lebanon. In the end Israel engaged the Lebanese and Syrians all the way to Beirut and subsequently found itself trapped in Lebanon for three years at a cost of 600 Israeli soldiers killed and some 3,000 wounded.

In Labor's view, the Israeli military was, for the first time, being used to make policy, not to defend it. The army was no longer merely a defensive instrument of the state but had been used as an aggressive force, a force now perceived as threatening the region's stability! Clearly, the political ideology driving this policy was radically different from that which had characterized the *weltanschauung* of the Labor movement. That it happened is due to the historical shift of power brought about by the 1977 elections. For the first time the Revisionist movement had won control of the Israeli government.

#### Political Upheaval 1977-1992

The dramatic outcome of the 1977 elections was due less to ideological proclivities than to certain cultural and social factors. On the one hand, there was the shock of the Yom Kippur War and its aftermath. But most of all it was the broad popular frustration with a Labor-controlled, insulated establishment, which had long demonstrated insensitivity to the ethnic interests and cultural traditions of certain immigrant groups. The result was the creation of a new reform movement and party which captured the imagination of large numbers of voters. The Dash (reform) party won a large protest vote which, with the combined strength of Herut and the Liberal Party in the Gahal alignment, resulted in the first political defeat of the Labor movement since independence. Thus, although Labor's defeat was more a consequence of social discontent than an expression of ideological principle, the assumption of power by representatives of the Revisionist movement nonetheless resulted in a radical change in public policy.

Remaining consistent to its ideological vision, the Revisionists, joined now by the religious Zionist movement and ultra-nationalist political elements, undertook an aggressive program of land expropriation and settlement building throughout the West Bank (Judea and Samaria) and the Gaza Strip.

By 1992, at a cost of billions of dollars from Israel's domestic budget, some one hundred and thirty settlements had been constructed with an estimated population of more than 100,000 people. Many settlements were located in densely populated Palestinian areas. These settlements, along with the road network accessing them, were intended to establish a permanent Israeli presence which would block Palestinian growth and control of their own lands. In political terms this policy was and is designed to prevent Palestinian control over a contiguous territorial land mass, one which would embody the national aspirations of the Palestinians.

For the Palestinian residents in the territories, the decade between 1977 and 1987 was one of increasing frustration. While Jewish settlers in the territories lacked few of the amenities of middle class suburban life, their Palestinian Arab neighbors received limited social services since they were not Israeli citizens, and saw their requests for building and development permits consistently refused, while at the same time becoming increasingly dependent on Israel for work opportunities. For Palestinians, work in Israel then meant employment in a society where they enjoyed only some of the legal benefits enjoyed by Israelis. Those who worked in Israel illegally were unaccounted for by the law and left to the exploitative designs of their employers.

#### The London Agreement and the Intifada

In the spring of 1987, during the time of the first Likud-Labor national unity government, Shimon Peres met secretly with Jordan's King Hussein in London. They made an historic agreement. It would have brought peace between Jordan and Israel on the principle of territorial compromise and the understanding that Jordan would assume responsibility for the indigenous Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. But Yitzhak Shamir and his Likud partners rejected this agreement. In retrospect this was one of their most serious blunders. Only recently Benjamin Netanyahu and his advisors were still hoping that they could develop some sort of new Jordanian "option." But since the time of the London agreement's rejection, King Hussein has been very consistent about his position. Not long after Yitzhak Shamir refused to support the London agreement, King Hussein formally announced his withdrawal from responsibility *and* claim over control of the West Bank. One wonders, in retrospect, if the Likud unwillingness at the time to seize the moment was simply the consequence of shortsightedness in vision or an act of ideological principle.

At the time, Hussein's historic announcement of his

disassociation from the territories exploded like a psychological time bomb within the refugee camps and overcrowded casbahs in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Added to this was the pent-up anger over twenty years of occupation under conditions of increasing despair and hopelessness. A volcano of bitterness burst forth onto the streets. For the first time since the 1967 War, violent demonstrations gave direct voice to the universal feelings of frustration felt by the Palestinian inhabitants of the territories.

The *intifada* began as a spontaneous expression of popular protest that spread rapidly first in Gaza and then throughout the West Bank. The subsequent five-year cycle of mass rioting, arrests, shooting, and killing sapped Israel of vital resources, destroyed international sympathy and good will for the Jewish state, and compromised Israel's moral strength. All the while, social and economic conditions in the territories continued to deteriorate. During the first half of this period, until 1990, the Israeli National Unity government was led by Yitzhak Shamir of the Likud. Implementation of policy in the territories was under the jurisdiction of the Defense Ministry headed by Yitzhak Rabin.

The apparent situation of near anarchy and even fratricide in the territories during the years of the *intifada* resulted in a diminution of PLO influence and control. At the same time the local Islamic fundamentalist forces, the Hamas and Islamic Jihad, offering a more spiritually appealing message of hope and social betterment, were attracting many despairing Palestinian followers. For its part, the now Likud-led government continued to build new settlements throughout the territories.

The Israeli response to the *intifada* embarrassed Israel's friends and generated feelings of deep concern among Jews in the diaspora. In Israel a raging debate over the moral, psychological, and legal consequences of the occupation policy was joined by the followers of the Revisionists and religious right wing, on one side, and those who identified with the Labor movement and liberal center, on the other.

The Labor movement characteristically looked at the reality confronting Israel and sought to find a pragmatic path to compromise and resolution. The Revisionists, on the other hand, maintaining consistency of principle, viewed the continuing advance of Israeli settlements throughout the Greater Land of Israel as reason enough to persevere against a recalcitrant Arab insurrection.

Then as now, the Palestinian reality demanded clear vision and understanding. One aspect of this are the striking Palestinian demographic facts and conditions

which one could ignore only at great risk. If allowed to grow and fester they could decidedly jeopardize Israel's international standing and seriously destabilize Israel's social and economic situation. Indeed, it is instructive to review the numbers.

In 1967, after the Six-Day War, the Palestinian population in the Gaza Strip was just 390,000. Today it is approaching 1,000,000. On the West Bank the Palestinian population is today about 1.5 million. And, at current growth rates, it is projected by the World Bank that by the year 2030 the Palestinian population in these areas will more than double. There will then be approximately 5.1 million Palestinians in the territories.

Of equal consequence is the fact that a majority of the Palestinian population is today under the age of 19. Thus, even before these huge numbers of youth are ready to enter into the work force, unemployment in the territories is already considered to be the highest of almost any area in the world. In the Gaza Strip in particular, according to UN reports, for more than a decade unemployment has fluctuated between 40 and 60 percent. Even in the best of times the level of unemployment has been extraordinarily high, far worse than in most impacted African countries.

Not surprisingly, during the years of the *intifada* the popular mood changed. Israel's declining economic situation was viewed by many through the prism of wasted billions in settlement building and maintenance. There was a growing concern for security on both sides of the green line due to the widespread violence and terror killings. And the nation became acutely aware of the fact that the international community, led by the United States, had become openly critical of Israel's policy of occupation and conflict with the Palestinians.

It was, however, the historic opening represented by the Gulf War and the fall of the Soviet Union which led, willy nilly, to the Madrid Peace Conference. Ironically, it was just such a conference which Yitzhak Shamir had, but two years earlier, called "stupid" and "ridiculous" when proposed by Shimon Peres and supported by Hosni Mubarak, King Hussein, Morocco's King Hassan, as well as by the E.C. and U.S. Not surprisingly, therefore, the period between the Madrid opening and the Israeli elections in 1992 was marked by "negotiating" meetings at which the Israeli teams, directed and, in some instances, led principally by Revisionist thinkers, did everything possible to buy time and stall while the settlement program moved forward at full steam. In fact, it was not until Yitzhak Rabin led the Labor Party to victory in 1992 that the peace process began to move forward in earnest.

### The Oslo Accords

The story of the Oslo negotiations and agreement is one which reflects the change in Israeli ideological orientation. It could not have happened had Revisionist irredentist policy-makers been involved. It happened because Labor Zionist thinkers and practitioners were in charge. They understood that in order to advance and secure the interests of the Jewish people and state a change in policy was necessary. A readiness to compromise was essential, even if it meant a diversion from the straight and narrow path of ideological purity. This was the sentiment which carried the day in 1947 when the Zionist movement, led by Labor, agreed to the Partition Plan. This was the same sentiment which again affirmed the principle of partition at Oslo in 1993.

In the opinion of many, the Oslo agreement was in certain ways as great an achievement as the declaration establishing the State of Israel. For until Oslo, the Palestinians were officially unwilling to accept the permanence of Jewish presence in the region — especially in a large part of Mandatory Palestine. Oslo represented a historical breakthrough in this regard. It represented the achievement of Israel's acceptance by its most uncompromising adversary. For the Palestinians, Oslo represented the achievement of international legitimacy and recognition as a nation with the right to self-determination.

The Oslo process has been complicated. The task of devising a formula for separation and mutuality after nearly 100 years of enmity, distrust, and conflict is not simple. But the reality of mutual interest and dependence cannot be gainsaid. Israel requires the Palestinian Authority's cooperation if the security situation is to be stabilized. The Palestinians require Israel's good will and assistance if their social and economic conditions are to improve and their national aspirations are to be realized.

The Oslo process has been belabored for many reasons. Periodic acts of Palestinian terrorism and dissatisfaction with the preventive measures taken by the Palestinian authorities resulted in the Labor government's slowing up of the process. Nonetheless, until the summer of 1996, the Oslo process remained on track. Negotiations continued to be conducted directly between Israel and the Palestinians without the necessity of outside intervention and/or guarantees of a third party because both sides were fundamentally committed to the Oslo accords and both sides were in good faith, intent on advancing the process.

At the same time, extremists in both communities continued to seek to undermine the process. On the

Jewish side, Baruch Goldstein and Yigal Amir were perhaps the most noteworthy. No less provocative and troublesome were the all too frequent acts of Jewish hooliganism and insult by fanatical settlers and undisciplined soldiers.

On their side, the Islamic fanatics have been lethal in their resistance efforts. Their acts of terror were decisive in giving credence to the Likud propaganda claim that the Labor government was naive and irresponsible in its effort to advance the peace process. This, in spite of the fact, that most of the terrorists originated in areas controlled by the IDF and not by the Palestinian Authority.

The facts on the ground today are the same as they were yesterday. The Palestinians are committed to the Oslo process. They require its implementation no less than does Israel. Indeed their need is not only one of historical urgency but of a national emergency. For if the democratically elected Palestinian leadership council is unable to improve living conditions, provide work for the Palestinian people, give its youth (a majority of the population) hope for a better future, and bring pride to the Palestinian nation in the symbols and ceremony of state building, then all could be forfeited on the anvil of resurgent Islamic irredentism and fanaticism.

Is the vision of Israel's future to be defined by a Revisionist movement which seeks to occupy and permanently control a land in which millions of people are denied their right to self-determination and sovereignty? Are we destined to live forever by the sword in order to control the violence and rage of a huge population of frustrated and angry people? Is this the Zionist dream or nightmare?

The Rabin and Peres governments were moving, through the Oslo process, towards a reality of population and geographical separation. With it there was an implicit, even articulated, quiet understanding that 70 percent of the settlers on some 5 to 10 percent of Palestinian territory would be incorporated under Israeli sovereignty as part of the final status agreement. In their opinion, when the border separating the two peoples would be clear, the possibility of coexistence would be enhanced because each people would be able to live in security, freely and fully in control of its own national life. Cooperation between the two peoples would thereafter be based on mutual interest and not dictated by force.

For Labor, the projected solution is a demilitarized Palestinian area, sovereign and independent, perhaps in confederation with Jordan, next to an independent, unthreatening Israel, welcomed as a neighbor and full

participant in the region's collective future. This remains the Labor Party's program. The questions which must be asked, therefore, are the following:

Will Israel's security situation be enhanced or diminished if thousands of settlers did not have to be defended in densely populated Palestinian areas?

Will Israel benefit socially and economically from a policy of Zionist irredentism and a plan to strengthen and make permanent Jewish presence throughout the territories?

Is the vision of Israel's future to be defined by its role as an occupying power, encircling tight geographical enclaves of Palestinians who supposedly will enjoy "maximum possible autonomy"?

The ideological visions of Labor Zionism and Revisionist Zionism remain in conflict. The struggle between these two camps is not yet resolved. The Revisionist camp is determined to advance its vision in spite of the Oslo accords. They believe that, in any event, the Arabs are fundamentally unwilling to accept us as permanent neighbors, and in the Arab mind the entire peace process is but a charade.

The other vision is of a future in which the Jewish state remains militarily strong but also politically realistic. This camp believes that the only way to permanently advance Israel's interests is by winning acceptance and legitimacy among our Arab neighbors by forging a constructive relationship with them, based on compromise, mutuality, and peace.

Benjamin Netanyahu considers this latter Labor Zionist view to be "entertaining." Nevertheless, he has

been compelled, by force of circumstance, to commit himself to fulfilling the interim stage of the Oslo agreements. This includes the redeployment of Israeli forces, in three stages, throughout the West Bank. It is here, however, that the remaining ideological strength of the Revisionist movement will be tested. For the prime minister and his colleagues are determined to do everything possible to insure the *expanded permanent presence* of Israeli settlements throughout the territories and, in so doing, to prevent the emergence of a contiguous territorial area which could become an independent and sovereign Palestinian state.

The Oslo accords do not stipulate how much territory is to be given up in each of the three successive redeployment stages. The expected minimalist approach of the Likud-led government, therefore, is bound to result in a new round of conflict and yet another test of the viability of the process. The Revisionists now intend to engage in an ultimate struggle to salvage as much of Greater Israel as possible, even, and perhaps by design, at the expense of a final peace agreement with the Palestinians.

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